

# The Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Kings 4:42-44
<i>Response</i>	Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 4:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	“A great prophet has arisen among us!” “God has visited his people!”
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:1-15

The seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B continues our study of St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians with verses from chapter 4, verses 1-6. This is a very famous, very foundational passage on the unity of the Church, which is a topic of great interest certainly since the last 400 years...450, 500 years now, since the Protestant Reformation, but also in the wake of the Second Vatican Council’s famous document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

So this is something we want to pay close attention to: What is the scriptural teaching on the nature and the unity of the Church? And Ephesians 4:1-6 is a classic text in that regard. So let’s read it together and try to unpack it in the light of the Church’s teaching on this matter. Ephesians 4:1 says:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, so what are these words about? A couple of points. First, notice when Paul says:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called... (Ephesians 4:1)

This is one of the reasons why Ephesians is counted among the letters of Paul known as the Prison Epistles. These are particular letters that Paul writes while he is in prison. We don't know exactly which prison. Scholars debate the exact times and places, but over the course of his ministry, Paul was imprisoned on several occasions. And so he apparently utilized that time — we can't engage in any active evangelization or missionary effort where you're going to a particular city and spreading the Gospel — he used what, shall we say (dare we say), he might use might be called his virtual presence. He used the technology of his day, the letter and the Roman postal system, to make himself present to his congregations through his letters.

So for example, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon — those are all Prison Epistles of Paul. They have that distinctive characteristic of having been written while he was in prison. And you'll often notice it in them, he'll take up the issue of suffering for the sake of the Gospel. He'll also bring up things like divisions within the congregations, because he's at pains to have unity between Christians when the Christians are being persecuted by the government. I mean, it's bad enough that the Church is being persecuted from the outside. We don't need divisions within when we're being persecuted from without, because as Jesus Himself says:

And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.  
(Mark 3:25)

Although he said that not with reference to the Church but with reference to the kingdom of Satan. So, that's the sign of division, by the way. It's a satanic thing. Anyway, we don't want to go into all that right now. That's not where Paul is going.

So the context is he's writing from prison. He's writing to the Church at Ephesus, which Ephesus is a major city in the first century AD — very prominent, very culturally influential, very wealthy city. And he's begging them to live a life in accordance with the calling with which they were called. So the second element of this passage that's important — I just want to keep highlighting this — is Paul's language of vocation. Whenever he says the word "call", he uses the Greek word *kaleó*. And he's speaking about what we would call "a vocation" — being called to some mission, some task. And when Paul uses vocation (language of vocation), unlike contemporary Catholic theology where we tend to use it in a narrow sense to refer to a particular calling either to priesthood or religious life, Paul uses it in a broad sense to refer to the calling of Baptism — the baptismal vocation. What is your vocation as a person who is a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, who is a member of the *ecclesia*, the Church?

Which, by the way, *ecclesia* means "those who are called out". *Ec* means "out of", *clesia* is from the Greek verb *kaleó*. So you actually have the word vocation built in to the Greek word for the Church. So people always say things like, "I wonder if I have a vocation." I'm like, "Are you in the Church? Yes! That means yes, you have a vocation. The word church means 'those who have vocations' — those who have been called out of the world, into the Body of Christ, and who are called to some particular mission for the sake of the Church and for the sake of the world...salvation of the world."

End of rant, sorry. It's just really important to emphasize this, because the narrower use of the term today can lead people to have false assumptions about their role and their identity in the Church and in the Body of Christ.

Okay, so he's trying to exhort the Ephesians here to live out their vocation, their baptismal vocation to life in Christ. And part of that baptismal vocation is to live a life of virtue — this is important — not just to be the member of a parish, be on the rosters, or even to receive the sacraments, although that's the doorway, but to live a life of virtue that corresponds to your vocation and your identity in Christ.

So the virtues he lists here — you're all called to lowliness. That's your vocation, lowliness, humility. You're called to meekness. Your vocation? Gentleness. You're called to — sorry, it's true — you're called to patience as your vocation. Called to forbear one another in love, so charity. Why? So that we can:

... maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

So Paul here is begging the Ephesians to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the peace that should reign between members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Because if you're really members of one body, all the organs and members should work together for the health and well-being of the body. If a house divided against itself cannot stand, a body divided against itself cannot live. This happens with certain diseases where the body's immune system attacks the body itself or some part of the body. It will kill you. That kind of autoimmune disorder can be deadly. Well, the same thing is true within the Body of Christ. We can't be fighting against one another and breaking the bond of the unity of the Spirit. That's how Satan's kingdom is, right? Divided. Kingdom of Christ? United.

And so Paul illustrates that with this long series of descriptors about all these unified elements, these elements of unity... or aspects, I should say, of unity in the Church. So I just want to walk through them and kind of identify them *one* at a time. Sorry, no pun intended. Well, it was kind of intended once I thought about it. Just walking through each one of them, because people will say sometimes, "Oh yeah, of course the Church has to have unity." But what does that mean? What do you mean specifically when you say unity? What kind of unity are we talking about here? Be specific. So here are the specific aspects of unity that Paul describes. So in verse 3, he says we're going to be:

...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

The Greek word for unity there is *henotēs*. It literally means "oneness". It's from the Greek number for one. So *henotēs* is oneness. So there's a oneness to the Church. Alright, what are the aspects of that oneness? Alright, so the first one (this is important, I'm going to walk through these) is visible unity. Visible unity — you see this in verse 4 when he says:

There is one body...

So crucial. There is no such thing as an invisible body. I mean, there might be in the movies or something like that, but as a rule, bodies are visible. So when he describes the Church as having one body, as Christ as having one body, that's its visible unity. There must be visible unity for the Church to be the true Church.

Second, there is also invisible unity. That's implied by his language of "one Spirit." So a lot of people — especially a lot of non-Catholic Christians — err. They say, "Oh yeah, I believe the Church is one." But they're talking about the invisible spiritual unity between Christians. We all have the same spirit, we have faith. But Paul, it's not either/or. It's both/and. It's not *just* invisible spiritual unity. It's also visible bodily unity. So invisible unity, visible unity.

Third, there's also eschatological unity. Remember eschatology talks about the future hope? Well, he says there is one hope. We all hope for the same thing, for the same end: the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. We say it in the Creed. That's our one hope. We share that hope. As a Christian you can't say, "Well, you know, I'm not so sure about the resurrection of the body. I think maybe some of us will be angels and then others of us might be pure spirits that just dwell in some other realm." No, no, no, no, no. There's *one* hope. The resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come — that's our hope. So we have one eschatology.

Fourth, a Christological unity. We have one Lord. There's not many different Jesuses running around — your Jesus, my Jesus, his Jesus, her Jesus, this Christ, that Christ. No, no, no. It's one Lord. And whenever Paul says Lord, the vast majority of the time he uses the word *kyrios* Lord to refer to Christ. So there's one Lord, one Christ. So we have one Christology.

There's also — this is important — doctrinal unity. And here he uses the term *pistis* in its way to refer to certain truths of faith to which we give assent — one faith. We believe the same things. You'll see this expressed in the early Church quickly as heresies rose. The rule of faith (is what it was called) was the profession of the

Creed — in its early form, the Apostle’s Creed, and then eventually as it developed you get the Nicene Creed and then the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which becomes the kind of final definitive form of the Creed that we profess to this day in Sunday Masses.

So the Creed is a summary of the essential elements of the one faith, the one apostolic faith that we all profess together. It’s not your faith, my faith. There is a subject development to faith — that’s not what Paul is talking about here. He’s talking about the unified element, the doctrinal element of the faith, the mysteries of the faith in which we all believe and which we participate.

Alright, so we’ve got visible unity, invisible unity, eschatological unity, Christological unity, doctrinal unity. We also have sacramental unity — very important. One faith, one Lord, one Baptism. So here Paul is talking about the rite through which we enter into the one Body of Christ. Every Christian has to enter into the Body of Christ ordinarily — there are some extraordinary circumstances or exceptions, but the ordinary path is through the waters of Baptism.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:5)

That’s Jesus, John chapter 3, because sacramental unity is also crucial.

Theological unity — we have *one* God. One Lord, one God. There you see the distinction too. Jesus, he’s referring to Christ as Lord. He’s referring to God the Father:

... one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.  
(Ephesians 4:6)

So here we see, notice, Paul climaxes his — this is not inconsequential. He climaxes his hymn to unity with the Trinity, with God the Father.

... one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

So you have the unity of Spirit, we have one Lord Christ, and then one God the Father. So what is the perfect symbol of true unity? It's the inconceivable and estimable, unfathomable, mysterious union of the one God who is three divine persons (three distinct persons), but they are so united they are in fact one true God. The mystery of the Trinity is the perfect example of unity and so that model of Trinitarian unity is what we seek to actualize in our lives in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. It's only the Holy Spirit who can bring about that kind of unity. And Paul knows that, and that's why he begins with the Spirit and ends with the Father.

Try to imagine a church where you've got visible unity, one body. You can see the church. It's clear this is the church. That invisible unity — that's a spiritual bond. You've got eschatological unity, doctrinal unity, Christological unity, sacramental unity, theological unity ... ultimately all within the Trinitarian framework.

That is the biblical description of the Church. That's not just the biblical ... that's the Pauline description of the Church. It's not individuals setting up their own churches, their own sects, their own divisions, sending themselves, giving themselves apostolic authority ... lack of clarity about who is the head, who are the members. No, no, no, no, no. That's not the Church of the apostles. The Church of the apostles is one. It's holy (Holy Spirit is the unifier). It's Catholic; it's universal. And it's apostolic. You can't see this in this verse, but if you have any doubts, you just back up to Ephesians 2, the same letter. After talking about us having access to one Spirit the Father, he actually says in chapter 2, verse 19:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

So notice the imagery there. The temple of God, the Church, is built upon what?

...the foundation of the apostles...

So it's an apostolic Church as well. So I bring all this up because in our day, especially with the proliferation of so many different Christian denominations and so many different sects, it can be very confusing. It can seem, actually, almost unbelievable when the Church, when we profess in the Creed, "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." How can we say there is one Church?

It's even more difficult when you see divisions within the Church, people in-fighting and that kind of thing. And that's been around since the beginning. It's a stumbling block to the belief in the unity. Paul himself is actually addressing it. He's trying to call the Ephesians to not have that kind of in-fighting. But it doesn't make him deny the oneness of the Church.

And so in closing, I'd just like to interpret these verses in light of what the Church says ... and invite you to really reflect on the unity of the Church, especially in light of the teaching of the Church. I want to look here at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 814-816. This is an excellent section on the unity of the Church, and it balances the issue of diversity with unity, because these are the two things that are in tension.

You might think, "Well, how can we have one Church when there are different rites within the Church?" We've got the Roman rite, the Byzantine rite, different forms of liturgy — that kind of thing. Different codes of Canon Law for the Eastern Church and then for the Western Church. What does it mean to speak of the unity of the Church? Listen to what the Church itself says:

From the beginning, this *one Church* has been marked by a great *diversity* which comes from both the variety of God's gifts and the diversity of those who receive them. Within the unity of the People of God, a multiplicity of peoples and cultures is gathered together. Among the Church's members, there are different gifts, offices, conditions, and ways of life. "Holding a rightful place in the communion of the Church there are also particular Churches that retain their own traditions."



And here the *Catechism* is referring to things like I just mentioned, like the Byzantine rite. You have the Gallican rite. You have different, especially with particular centers of apostolic Christianity — the Church in Alexandria, the Church in Antioch. These were major apostolic centers that were in communion with the Church in Rome but had different customs, different liturgical traditions than the Church in Rome. So there's a diversity within that unity.

*The great richness of such diversity is not opposed to the Church's unity. Yet sin and the burden of its consequences constantly threaten the gift of unity.*

Wow, so powerful. Say it again:

...sin and the burden of its consequences constantly threaten the gift of unity.

And so the Apostle has to exhort Christians to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” [Eph 4:3].

So the *Catechism* continues:

What are these bonds of unity? Above all, charity “binds everything together in perfect harmony.” But the unity of the pilgrim Church is also assured by *visible bonds of communion...*

And he lists three here. Number one:

— profession of *one faith* received from the Apostles;

Do you confess and believe the Creed? Second:

— *common celebration of divine worship*, especially of the sacraments;

So do you have valid apostolically originated sacraments? And then third, apostolic succession — this is so crucial:

— *apostolic succession* through the sacrament of Holy Orders, maintaining the fraternal concord of God’s family.

And this is where after the Reformation it really breaks down, because unlike the Eastern Orthodox Churches, which have apostolic succession, the Churches that descend from the Protestant Reformation do not. They reject succession of the apostles, reject that idea of apostolic succession. And so that is lost in the 16th century. This is a major, major point of division and a difference. But in the Catholic Church, we have apostolic succession — the fact that our bishops were ordained by bishops who were ordained by bishops who go all the way back to the apostles. So the *Catechism* concludes:

“The sole Church of Christ [is that] which our Savior, after his Resurrection, entrusted to Peter’s pastoral care, commissioning him and the other apostles to extend and rule it... This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him.”

Then it quotes the Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on Ecumenism* and says this ... this is important. This is Vatican II. A lot of people question, “Well, what about Vatican II? What did it teach about the Church? What is ecumenism? Does it mean that all the Christian denominations are the same, it doesn’t really matter to which you belong?” Not according to Vatican II. Vatican II said this in its *Decree on Ecumenism*:

“For it is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the People of God.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 813-815

So notice, Vatican II and the *Catechism* following Vatican II is very clear that the fullness of the Christian faith is found in the one Catholic Church alone and that the visible unity that Christ willed for the Church to possess is something that's found only in the Catholic Church, precisely because only the Catholic Church maintains the visible unity, not just of the bishops (who are the successors of the apostles) but of the bishop in union with the Vicar of Christ — the pope, the bishop of Rome who is the successor of St. Peter — to whom Christ entrusted the Church when He gave him authority in the image of the keys of the kingdom of Heaven.

So in closing, I just want to emphasize here — this is very important — sometimes people depict Paul as if he's like a rogue apostle, like he goes his own way. He's kind of the Frank Sinatra of the apostles, "I did it my way." That he's almost kind of a proto-Protestant reformer. Whereas the twelve apostles might have had this organizational structure and kind of hierarchy, it had a kind of had an authoritative hierarchy, Paul operates outside of that and not in communion with them.

And that's just false. It's false from Galatians, where Paul says he sought the fellowship, the hand of fellowship from the apostles before he did his mission so that he made sure he wasn't preaching in vain, but also in Ephesians, where Paul clearly describes the Church as one visible Church with one Lord, one faith, and one Baptism.